

VIA Rail to receive \$2.3 billion in subsidies

GILLES GAGNÉ

NEW RICHMOND – The federal budget presented on November 4 granted an additional \$944 million in subsidies to VIA Rail, bringing its support from the Canadian government to \$2.3 billion in 2025-2026.

However, this amount appears insufficient to encourage the public rail carrier to return to its Gaspé Peninsula route east of Matapédia.

This situation is being strongly denounced by Alexis Deschênes, Bloc Québécois Member of Parliament (MP) for Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine—Listuguj, who deplores VIA Rail's inflexibility and its "denial of responsibility towards Gaspé Peninsula users," he says.

Mr. Deschênes also deplores VIA Rail management's refusal to answer questions detailed questions about the return of train service between Montreal and New Carlisle, or Montreal and Port-Daniel. New Carlisle and Port-Daniel will once again be accessible to passenger and freight trains in early December.

"It's their strategy, VIA Rail's management, not to answer, to make as few waves as possible, and to be as unaccountable as possible. Earlier this year, I met with an executive, Denis Boucher, who told us he was back to the drawing board [...] Since then, I've understood that we're not being taken seriously and that VIA Rail has no interest in the Gaspé Peninsula," explains Alexis Deschênes, who remains undeterred by the public carrier's management.

“We’ll come back with a better strategy, put pressure on the politicians, and highlight their denial of responsibility. I met with the federal Minister of Transport, Steven McKinnon, a few weeks ago. He told me he



Photo: Gilles Gagné

Since September 2013, Gaspé residents wishing to take the passenger train have had to travel to Campbellton, New Brunswick, or to Matapédia.

will speak with VIA Rail and raise the issue of service in the Gaspé Peninsula,” adds the Bloc Québécois MP.

The additional \$944 million, which brings VIA Rail's annual subsidy to \$2.282 billion precisely, will be put to a vote by MPs on or before December 10. Of this amount, \$63 million will be allocated to the operational needs fund and \$568 million to the fund for services outside the Quebec City - Windsor corridor.

"So, 60% of the additional funds will go to the fund for services outside the Quebec City - Windsor corridor. That works out well since the Gaspé Peninsula is located right outside that corridor! When you see this additional \$944 million and realize that the Matapédia - Gaspé train cost taxpayers between \$4 and \$4.5 million per year in the 2000s, you can clearly see that VIA Rail easily has the financial means to resume its essential service in Gaspésie!" says Mr. Deschênes.

Since the end of former VIA Rail president Yves Desjardins Siciliano's term in May 2019, the company's management has maintained a "Gaspé or noth-

ing" stance, refusing to resume service in stages between Matapédia and Gaspé, that is just when the railway line between New Richmond and Gaspé will be repaired.

Mr. Desjardins Siciliano had expressed openness to a phased resumption of service in 2017 and 2018. VIA Rail had suspended its service in phases between 2011 and 2013, first between New Carlisle and Gaspé due to bridge repairs in Chandler, and then between Matapédia and New Carlisle in September 2013, primarily due to the condition of other bridges.

Freight rail service has never been suspended between Matapédia and New Richmond. The distance between Matapédia and Port-Daniel represents roughly 62% of the Matapédia-Gaspé route.

At the beginning of the 2000s, VIA Rail's annual operating cost for the Montreal - Gaspé train was close to \$7 million, with revenues ranging between \$2 million and \$3 million. Hence Mr. Deschênes' assessment that the taxpayers' contribution to the Gaspé Peninsula service was between \$4 million and \$4.5 million. It was VIA Rail's regional train with the highest cost recovery ratio.

“It’s getting ridiculous”

Alexis Deschênes concludes that the attitude of VIA Rail's management is "getting ridiculous! They have the right to be transparent. If they have details to provide, they should. The response given at the annual public meeting proves that we are not in a relationship of openness and honesty. They are not respecting our demands by providing falsehoods."

The Bloc Québécois MP is referring to comments made by VIA Rail president Mario Pélou-

of VIA Rail's mission, but they (managers) show no attention, no respect for the people of the Gaspé Peninsula [...] People are frustrated to be dealing with a public corporation, flush with cash, funded by our public money, to see it accept this injustice, to see it consider us so unimportant that even though we pay taxes, we are ignored; we are far from being a priority," explains Alexis Deschênes.

Even though more and more people are considering a solution “outside of VIA Rail” to bring passenger train service back to the Gaspé Peninsula, the Bloc Québécois MP still favours applying pressure to force this public corporation to do its homework.

“Why accept having fewer services? The answer is political. All it takes is for a Minister of Transport to force VIA Rail to fulfill its mandate. Minister MacKinnon is supposed to address this issue,” concludes Mr. Deschênes.



Photo: Gilles Gagné

Bloc Québécois MP Alexis Deschênes finds it absurd that VIA Rail, which will receive \$2.282 billion in subsidies for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2026, refuses to reinstate service between Matapédia and Port-Daniel.